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Ukraine: Restive Again

The republic most vital to the Soviet Union's economy, aside from the Russian Republic itself, is the Ukraine. And in recent years the rich and fertile region has become a hotbed of nationalist fervor that is causing concern for the Kremlin.

CIA cables have noted a series of anti-Soviet (and anti-Russian) protests in Ukrainian cities in the past two years, evidently fueled by the Solidarity movement in Poland.

The man who has put down these outbreaks is Ukrainian Communist Party chief Vladimir Shcherbitsky, the same man who lectured President Reagan on the dangers of "Star Wars" when he headed a Soviet delegation to Washington in March. Shcherbitsky quickly learned that the local Ukrainian militia could not be depended on to quell the protests unless there were KGB troops on the scene to "encourage" them. So Shcherbitsky now tends to call in the reliably ruthless KGB troops at the first hint of trouble.

A special CIA report concludes that the Ukrainian nationalist movement has small chance of success. Though it points out that the Ukraine has the mineral and agricultural wealth to sustain a self-sufficient economy, the report explains that Soviet leaders will never willingly relinquish the 50 million people in this region the size of France because it "serves both as a granary and a major mineral producer for the Soviet Union."

But it has also been fertile ground for dissent. "A sociological breakdown of Ukrainian dissidents reveals, not unexpectedly, a heavy preponderance of writers, linguists, historians, journalists, teachers and lawyers," the CIA report says. But it is the scientists and technicians "whose opposition is [most] troublesome for Soviet authorities." The CIA says about one-fourth of arrested dissidents are in this category.

"Perhaps even more alarming for the regime," the report adds, "are signs of nationalism among lower strata of the population. A great fear of the central authorities may be that, at some period of great strain for the government, such as military attack by China or a [struggle] among top Soviet leaders, Ukrainian intellectual dissidents could tap a reservoir of latent mass discontent." But, the CIA cautions, "it is difficult to know whether the peasantry would rally to a future Ukrainian nationalist movement in time of crisis in Moscow."

The Ukrainian peasants have been oppressed and betrayed by both imperial and communist Russians for centuries. They won their independence for a brief period in the turmoil after World War I, but Moscow-directed Bolsheviks quickly suffocated the infant Ukrainian republic in 1920.

A dozen years later, Stalin's brutal "land reform"—forcing the peasants into collective farms at gunpoint and starving those who resisted—cost the Ukraine more than 7 million lives, according to some estimates.

The survivors of Stalin's oppression made another understandable mistake in 1941, when they welcomed Hitler's armies as liberators from communism, only to learn that the Nazis were able to match Stalin's executioners body for body.

Why should the Ukraine be restive again? More than other minority republics, it is "susceptible to East European influence, due to the historical association of West Ukraine with bordering East European countries, and the polyglot character of the affected populations. If discontent in the Ukraine mounted sufficiently to create a 'revolutionary situation,' a revolt in Eastern Europe could have a catalytic effect."

But the CIA recalls that this did not happen in 1968, despite widespread Ukrainian sympathy for the Czechoslovakians.

Two hard facts of life militate against the Ukrainian dissidents. One is the fact that, unlike the satellite countries, the Ukraine has no national army of its own. The second is that Ukrainians in the upper echelons of the Soviet regime are party loyalists first and Ukrainians second. Everything they have achieved personally they owe to the central government, and they know it.

But even though "a serious separatist effort is not in sight," the CIA experts say that "nationalism in the Ukraine appears to be waxing rather than waning."